Q: Good afternoon. Today is May 3rd, 2018. My name is Dorothea Black, and I'm here at Newton City Hall with John Stewart. Together we are participating in the Newton Talks Oral History project that is being conducted with the Newton Free Library, Historic Newton and the Newton Senior Center. So glad you could be here.

A: Thank you very much for having me.

Q: And you are a longtime Newton resident, and you were also a veteran.

A: Yes.

Q: And since we're interested in both things, let's start with your military experience. Where--let's start with what you were doing before you entered the service. Where were you then?

A: The quick story is that I grew up in the town of Bedford, between Lexington and Concord, went to Lexington High School, graduated in 1950. I was born in 1932, graduated from high school in 1950. My high school career was not a great success. My marks were terrible, and I really had no idea what I was going to do after I graduated from high school, and just decided, obviously, that I would get a job and then wait to be drafted because people were getting drafted--well not at a very young age, but the draft was still enforced. And then, of course, in June of 1950, the Korean War started, so the whole call-up of people increased considerably after that. So I got a job in--after graduating from high school, and then in...let me see, in late 19--well, the summer of 1952, I guess I decided that I wanted to get this Army stint over with. So I went to the draft board and asked that they put my name on the top of the list, which they did. And in January 1953, I was drafted and went into the Army and served two years, which was a--well, we can get into that a little bit more, but that's how I got into the Army.

Q: And did you always know it would be the Army? Was that a choice?

A: Good question. It wasn't a choice if you got drafted. On the other hand, there was a period when they were drafting people, and then assigning them to the Marine Corps--assigning a few people to the Marine Corps. My brother-in-law, for example, got drafted and assumed he would go into the Army like everybody else, and then when he got to the Boston Army base they picked out about a dozen people and said "You fellows are gonna be Marines." And so he ended up as a Marine for two years. But 99 percent of people who got drafted went into the Army.

Q: So even though you pushed the process along, how did you feel about being drafted at the time?

A: Well, again, I--it was something every young person had to do, and I just wanted to do it and then hopefully get on with my life. On the other hand, I didn't really know what I was gonna do career-wise or where my life was going, but I knew I had to get this two years or even four years of military service done. A number of my friends at the time decided to go into the Air Force. The Air Force was a relatively new organization. The Air Force had only been created as an independent entity in 1947, I think. Before that it was part of the Army, the Army Air Corps. And they created the Air Force, and it had a lot of appeal for young people. It was not combat, for example, and it was safe, and they guaranteed you some training, and it was--it had--it was a very appealing thing. And I came reasonably close to enlisting in the Air Force for two--for four years and then I backed out and two of my best friends went ahead with it. And I went in the Army later than--a year later and I got out a year sooner than them because they did four years and I only did two.

Q: Where were you stationed when you joined?

A: I originally went to Fort Devens like everybody for a week or two, and then we got on buses one morning and ended up at Camp Pickett, Virginia, which is...I guess about 30 or 40 miles from the North Carolina/Virginia border in southern Virginia. And I spent--I did my basic training there, and then I was very fortunate--that summer I was assigned to a unit at a camp in Virginia, and spent the summer with National Guard troops. I drove a tank, and there were six or seven of us who were assigned to spend the summer helping these National Guard troops learn about firing the guns on tanks and so forth. So it was a wonderful experience. So we spent--I spent two or three months there and then went back to Camp Pickett. And then fortunately again I got assigned to the regimental commanders tank--little three or four tank unit. So I spent three or four months doing very, very little except maintaining the tank that I was assigned to. The unit--the regiment was scheduled to go on maneuvers the following January, and so they had got these new tanks in preparation for the maneuvers. And, as I say, I spent several months doing very little except playing football and basketball and maintaining this tank. And then I said, "Well, if I'm gonna--I have to serve another year, so I'll try to go overseas." So I had, fortunately, a friend who was in the personnel office, and he arranged for me to get orders to go to Europe. So I spent essentially the second year in Austria, which was absolutely wonderful. And I got there in February or in March--no, in late February--and then I spent that whole year in Austria.

Austria at the time was divided--like Germany, was essentially occupied and divided into four zones: American, French, British and Russian. And we were sort of at the dividing line between the Russian and American zones, and our job, in case the Russians ever decided to start a war, was to sort of delay the Russian advance and retreat as fast as we could. And we used to patrol the--there was a river that was the divide--that was literally the dividing line for 50 or 60 miles, and we would patrol the river. And the Russians would be doing the same thing on the other side of the river, which was sort of interesting.

Q: Could you actually see them?

A: Oh yes, yeah, yeah, yeah.

Q: And were you still involved with tanks or was this different?

A: I was still in an armoured reconnaissance battalion, but I didn't drive tanks over there. I had another function. In--let's see, I got there in February--in early April, I was sent to a combat intelligence school for three or four weeks, which was very, very interesting. And we learned how to interrogate prisoners and learned a lot about reconnaissance tactics, which fascinated me. I was--I really ate it up. I loved the Army, particularly that second year, because I was just seriously engaged in the whole thing. I became a corporal and an assistant squad leader, and we were constantly going on these little maneuvers and exercises and spending three or four nights out in the field someplace. So it was wonderful.

Q: So it sounds like you adapted relatively easily and you--and military life was good for you.

A: Yes, yes, absolutely. Among other things--I may be rambling too much, but--

Q: This is perfect.

A: --among other things, as I say, my high school career, academically, was not terribly successful and I read the papers every day and I'd read a book every month or two, but I was not--I did not do much reading. But in the Army, particularly when I got to Austria, I started to read. I started to spend a lot of evenings at the base library, and I became a very, very serious reader of history, politics, religion, you name it, and which really was very, very helpful in my life, generally. I mean it, it showed me that I could go to college if I wanted to, and could do reasonably well, I guess, which is what happened.

Q: Are there, is there anything from those years that really stands out as being memorable, either good or not so good?

A: Well again, the experience in Austria was very enjoyable. It was difficult. We would often, as I say, be out in the woods someplace for two or three days, sleeping in pup tents and all the rest, but I enjoyed it. I was serious about learning the tactics and strategy and just how the whole thing was done. And then, as I say, in addition to that, I did a lot of reading, and it just a good experience. I seriously thought of staying in the Army at the end of my tour. In fact, I had several discussions with the company commander about applying to be an officer and staying in the Army, and then I simply decided to--"No," I said, "I'm gonna get out and go to college, and maybe I'll come back one day, but…" And I--in many, many ways, I was following the lead of my brother.

I had a brother who was two years older than me, and he had gone into the Army a year before me. And he became an officer and ended up in Korea, fortunately just after the fighting stopped. And he spent a year or two in Korea, and then he got discharged about 6 months before I was due to get out, and he started college at Northeastern. So, he was sort of the example that I had before me.

Q: So you came out as a young man with purpose?

A: I did indeed, yes, yes.

Q: What was it like then to re-enter civilian life?

A: I had no problem. I mean it was--well, I guess the--it was both a plus and a minus, but I was--by the time I got out I was 22, almost 23, and so I was pretty old to be a freshman in college, and--which had, as I say, some advantages, some disadvantages. I was certainly much

more mature than I was at 17 when I got out of high school. And I think because of that, and a lot of other things that had happened, I did much better in college--much better than I would have done if I had gone right out of high school. So I--plus of course, I--all of my tuition was paid for by the GI Bill, which occasionally made me feel a little guilty. I mean, I spent two years, and the Army gave me all this--not a lot of money, but it was precisely enough to pay the tuition at BU [Boston University] with very, very little left over. But it--you know, if I hadn't had that, I probably wouldn't have gone to college.

Q: So you applied to BU and that's where you went for four years?

A: Yes. Actually for five years. I stayed on and got a master's degree.

Q: Is that where you chose your field of work?

A: Oh, not really. I was still somewhat undecided. Do we want to get into my career a little bit?

Q: Briefly, yeah, yeah.

A: I was still very undecided. I majored in history and political science, and then I got a master's degree in history, and I thought I would become a teacher. And I--on the other hand, I was turned off by the education courses in the School of Education, so I never--I didn't get certified as a teacher. But I applied to a number of jobs and nothing happened. So I essentially--well I had one job before I started with the federal government, but I became a social worker for the City of Boston Welfare Department and did that for a year and a half or so. And then I took the exam for a federal employees training program of some kind and was hired by the Internal Revenue Service, and I essentially stayed with the federal government for the next 40 years.

Q: And that leads us closer to how you came to Newton, but when did you first arrive in Newton, and how did you do choose Newton?

A: Alright. The route was a little--it wasn't direct from Bedford to Newton. I--as I say, I graduated from college in 1959. I worked for the City of Boston Welfare Department for about a year, and in 1960 I started with the Federal Government with the Internal Revenue Service and worked there for two years, and then simply decided that if I was going to make a career of working in the federal government the only place to be was in Washington DC. So I went down to Washington and knocked on a lot of doors one week in June of 1962, I guess it was--and I had been married meanwhile, I got married in November 1961--and ended up with offers of three jobs: one with the State Department; one with NASA; and one with the General Services Administration. And for a whole variety of reasons, decided to take that. And the General Services Administration was the parent agency of the National Archives. So when they found out that I had a master's degree in history, I very soon transferred to the National Archives. And from the National Archives I got into the work at the Kennedy Library in 1966, and essentially stayed with the Kennedy Library for the next 33 years, which was the bulk of my career.

Q: So you moved back to the Boston area...

A: So then I--as is described in my little book, when I started with the Kennedy Library in June of 1966, my first job was as director of the oral history project. So I spent three or so years running the oral history project, and doing a lot of the interviews. I did a hundred and twenty or thirty interviews for the project. And then in the fall of 1969, I came back to Massachusetts and had the job of setting up a temporary Kennedy Library, you know, in a record center in a warehouse in Waltham, because the permanent Kennedy Library building had not been constructed. So I was in charge of that for a few years, and then the whole thing just got bigger and bigger. And I stayed on and on

Q: And then somewhere in there you--

A: And we moved to Newton in 1970, my wife and I. And we had two children then and we moved to Newton in 1970, and then had another child in 1974. And I very, very quickly--I don't know if you want to get into this now, I very quickly got involved in Newton. Like a lot of people, primarily through the school. On the other hand, there was a mayoral election in 1971 and I connected with the campaign of a fellow named Bill Carmen. And my wife and I ran a little party one Sunday afternoon for Bill Carmen, and he lost to Teddy Mann, and so I sort of got into Newton politics, and--quickly.

Q: Yes.

A: And then, as I say, I became very involved with the elementary school in Lower Falls, Hamilton school, and became president of the PTA. And then in 1975, some people asked me if I'd be interested in running for the Board of Aldermen, which I did, and I won and served a term, and then got defeated in 1977, but--which was alright; I had a lot of other things to do and I did them.

Q: And then you returned again?

A: Pardon?

Q: And then you came back as an alderman later?

A: Yes, I stayed very, very involved. I was--oh gosh, I was on the board of a couple of organizations and I became president of Newton Youth Hockey. My kids--I have three sons, and they were all into sports, as I was, and they played hockey and baseball and soccer. And so I was president of Newton Youth Hockey, and I coached a lot of baseball and soccer teams, and was

extremely busy. And then in 1980--and stayed involved, stayed connected with politics to a certain extent. And then in 1987, decided to run for the Board of Aldermen again, which I did, and served two terms. And then just--I found it was--I just didn't have the time. I was extremely busy at my job at the Kennedy Library. By that time I was Director of Education, and I was just over my head with work, and it was very difficult to handle my duties as an alderman. So I gave it up after two terms. And then I retired in 1999 from the Kennedy Library, from the federal government, and I did a variety of things after that. And in 2001, decided to run for the Board of Aldermen again, which I did, and served two terms and then just decided to retire.

Q: So you've seen a lot going on in Newton over the years. Have you always lived in Lower Falls?

A: Yes. We've lived in the same little house we bought in 1970, and Lower Falls has been a big, big part of my life. As I say, I've been very, very involved. I was president of the Newton Lower Falls Improvement Association. And Lower Falls is a very active community, and I've been active in just about everything that's happened there for the last 48 years, I guess.

Q: Can you say if there's anything about Lower Falls that's distinctive--that sets it apart a bit from the other villages?

A: Oh boy! How long do we have? A lot of people in Newton don't understand Newton Lower Falls. Newton Lower Falls is a little island. If you look at a map of Newton, it's a--and you see Lower Falls, it's that little, little part of Newton on the other side of Route 128, bordered by 128 and the Charles River. And it--there were only three hundred and forty houses, mostly, almost all single-family, a few two-family houses, but about three hundred and forty houses and about a hundred and ten apartment units. No serious commercial area-- there was a little, well it's getting bigger, a commercial area, but it's on the other side of the river in Wellesley. We had an elementary school, which closed in 1979 and was converted to elderly apartments, plus an

absolutely wonderful community center, which is run by the Parks and Recreation Department but used by the neighborhood for a whole bunch of things. But again, Lower Falls is very unique sociologically. It's small, it's--the boundaries are very, very well-defined, unlike a lot of villages in Newton, where you don't really know, you know, where Waban ends and Newton Highland begins, or where Newtonville ends and Nonantum begins. You know, there's a lot of fuzziness about the exact borders of villages in Newton, but there is no fuzziness about Lower Falls. And as a result, it's a very friendly community. Going way back, it's been an active community, and because it's so small, it's very, very easy for people to know a lot of people in the neighborhood. And we have had a listserv, for example, for the last 20 years or so and it's a remarkable device. I mean, people communicate all kinds of things, you know, "My cat is missing, did anybody see a cat around?" And people send out messages, "I have to borrow something, a jack for my car," or something. And it's a great communication device for the neighborhood, and people use it for both small, almost trivial things and to have some big discussions about political things, about things going on in Newton or whatever. So Lower Falls is very unique in a lot of ways. It's by far the smallest village. I don't know if you can even call it a village, it's so tiny. And it--as I say, it's set way out there. There are a lot of people who don't--who just think, "Oh, that's somewhere in Auburndale," but it's not somewhere in Auburndale. You know, it's across the across the highway, and it's very well-defined neighborhood.

Q: Very tight-knit community.

A: Yes.

Q: What are some of the changes that you've seen over the years in Lower Falls?

A: Well, there have been--the first big change--Lower Falls was--like a lot of neighborhoods in Newton, Lower Falls was built up right after World War II, and by the mid 1960's there were very few, if any, vacant lots in Lower Falls. You know, every house that could be built was built.

And when we moved there in 1970, Lower Falls was a very economically, a very sort of middle-of-the-road kind of place. It was not extremely wealthy and it was not impoverished. And most of the people who lived there were either postmen, firemen, you know, entry-level lawyers or people who planned to live in a small house for six or seven, eight years and then go out, go someplace else. So it was a--houses were relatively equal in terms of value. There were a few bigger houses and a few very small houses but generally it was pretty much alike. But it wasn't a development in any sense--there were one or two streets where there were three or four houses that had been built at the same time, but it had a wonderful look to it. And in the middle of these three hundred houses was this school in this absolutely beautiful park.

So--but the big thing that has happened--well obviously they closed the school, which was a major, major struggle and people were very, very upset about it, but the neighborhood survived. And then, I guess, sometime in the 90's people started to either tear down houses, small houses, or significantly add on to houses. So, I mean, ever since, maybe not the 90's, but the early 2000's, there have always been one or two or three houses in the process of being torn down and rebuilt. And so people would tear down a small cape and build a large million and a half dollar house. So it's happened a lot in Lower Falls. And, as I say, a lot of people have built huge additions. I mean, a lot of the houses that I remember from the 1970's are now almost double the size. People that put a big addition on the back or whatever, which is great--indicating that people love the neighborhood and are willing to invest in their houses because they want to stay there. We never did much expansion of our house and I don't know how we survived with three children in--three boys--in a very small cape, but we did and it's now a lovely little house for two people.

Q: And there are fewer houses like that now in Newton left.

A: There are a lot fewer houses. That's one of the problems in Newton, is that there aren't too many small houses for two people, especially elderly people. And the prices of houses has just gone so high, it's very difficult for older people.

Q: And that must have changed the nature of the neighborhood and the families who live there over time.

A: Well, it did to a certain extent, but not totally. Yes, I guess there's been sort of an upscaling of--and there are probably more doctors there and psychologists and lawyers and people with some wealth. On the other hand, people have to be doing relatively well to buy any kind of a house in Newton these days. On the other hand, there are still--there are a decent number of carpenters and postmen and teachers and people who have relatively modest incomes. But, yes, it has changed. Ethnically, it's probably changed. There were hardly any Asian people there when we moved there in 1970, and now there are many, many Asian people. But it's still a lovely neighborhood.

Q: What about the park? The school's gone, but does the park remain?

A: The park remains, and it's a wonderful, level playing field. Newton Girls Soccer plays there all the time, and there were softball games and everything else. And the neighborhood has had a beautification committee, and has planted dozens and dozens of big trees. When we moved there in 1970 there were a lot of very, very large trees surrounding this big field, and a lot of them have died and got blown over or whatever. So the neighborhood, as I say, has been replacing trees at a fantastic rate for many years, and so the park is really beautiful. It's lined with trees, and there are a lot of other plantings that have been done by people.

Q: With three boys in sports you must have spent a lot of time in that park.

A: I did. I still spend quite a bit.

Q: Are there any other landmarks in Lower Falls or anywhere in Newton that--either past or still remaining--that have been important to you or have been favorite places?

A: That have been important?

Q: Yes, or have been places you've spent time or favorite places.

A: I spent a lot of time at City Hall. I spend a decent amount of time at the Newton Library. I was fortunate to play a very, very small role in the creation of the Newton Library. I don't know if you know the story, but in the early 90's, by the early 90's, Newton had a serious, serious problem. The main library, which was in Newton Corner, was in terrible, terrible condition. Newton had about a dozen or thirteen branch libraries, many of which were in nice buildings, but it had no main library. And this big debate about whether Newton needed a new main library had been going on for a number of years. And there were various proposals to build a new Central Library in Newtonville or someplace else, and they never gained much traction. People were afraid of the cost of building a new structure. But then the issue really got forced in the late 80's, early 90's I guess, because the old building in Newton Corner was just falling apart, physically.

Q: I remember.

A: You remember it?

Q: Uh-huh.

A: So Teddy Mann appointed a blue-ribbon committee, 20 to 25 people, to study the whole process of building a new library. And I was a member of that committee, and I was a member of

the subcommittee with the head librarian, Mrs. Tashjian, and Florence Rubin and several other people. And we, in effect, drafted the program statement for what was needed in the library in terms of space and all of that. And I was--like everybody--I was thrilled to see that building go up. And it was--it's not only magnificent architecturally, but it actually was built below budget. The original budget-- I was on the Board of Aldermen at the time--was, I think, like 18 million dollars and it was built for 16 million or some such figure.

Q: Amazing.

A: So it's an absolutely spectacular building, and I spend a decent amount of time there.

Q: From your perspective as an alderman, what have been some of the big successes in Newton and what have been some of the big problems in your view?

A: Oh boy. I--in all of my terms, I was a member of the Finance Committee, and I like to think the finances of Newton have always been handled in a very good way, in a reasonable way. On the other hand, this whole pension business, the pension liability, is a serious problem. And a lot of people like me should have recognized that 30 or 40 years ago--that the city, like all communities, was heading to a problem financially because of this unfunded liability. But Newton is essentially well-managed. On the other hand, it--I always said, it could be better.

The school department--the schools are obviously wonderful and people have always done a lot of things in Newton that other communities don't do. They've paid a lot of attention to the quality of teachers, for example, which is obviously the key to any good school system. And, on the other hand, there are people who think that the city is spending probably maybe a little too much on schools and ignoring some of the other problems. The streets, for example, our streets are in pathetic shape. I mean pathetic. It's a tragedy they're so bad.

Newton has not done an extremely good job of planning--of planning for development, for example. And we see this all the time, anytime anyone wants to make a big change, as in Newtonville along Washington Street, there's a big furor, and people don't want to see Newton change. Newton is fine, don't make many changes. And as a result Newton doesn't have enough commercial property. And it's commercial property that pays a lot of taxes and, and there's very little expense for the city. So--but basically Newton is a fine place.

Q: I think, yes, we love Newton, but it's not perfect.

A: It's far from perfect.

Q: Nowhere is perfect.

A: And this whole issue of--I don't how you call it, diversity--this whole housing situation has been good and it's been bad. It's a wonderful thing that people are spending all the money they do for houses because it adds to the income of the city and enables the city to run these wonderful schools. On the other hand, the city is becoming less diverse, and there are fewer and fewer people of modest means, and--which eventually is going to become a serious problem, I think. And there are no comparable communities. Newton is little bit like Weston and Wellesley and Dover and Needham. On the other hand, it's so much bigger than these communities. And I don't know what the future is going to be like.

Q: If there was one thing that you could change, one change you could make for the future, what would it be?

A: Oh my gosh. I mean, I would--I was in favor of the charter reform. I would love to see--there are a lot of big problems and little problems with the way the city is organized, politically or administratively. And I would like to see a smaller city council. I don't know.

Q: One thing that we haven't covered is some pastimes in Newton. You and your boys, what kinds of things did you--have you enjoyed doing in Newton and how has that changed over the years?

A: Well we--again, we were very fortunate. And there's one thing I didn't mention about Lower Falls, is that it is almost literally right next to the Charles River. And so there was a lot of wooded areas around Lower Falls. My--all three of my sons got into fishing at a very young age when they were 10, 11, 12. And all three of them still like to fish and they still are outdoors kinds of people.

Q: That's wonderful.

A: And it came from growing up in Lower Falls.

Q: Is there anything that we haven't talked about that--

A: As I say, I could go on and on and on about things, but...I think--

Q: We have a few more minutes. Is there something that you can--that you'd like to share that's--

A: Well, I guess I should say a word about housing for the elderly. I mean, again, my wife and I, we're both in our 80's. She's just 80 and I'm--I'll be 86 this year. And we think every once in a while of where we're gonna go if we get ill or incapacitated in some way and can't live alone in a single-family house. And while we're--financially we could afford some places in Newton, it's a fairly limited number of places. I mean, if we really wanted to live in a--as a lot of older people live, in a--not in a retirement community, but in a community that's mostly older people, we'd have to leave Newton, because there aren't any big apartment complexes that are that affordable,

which again, is I'm sure a problem for a lot of people. And, as I say, we were very fortunate, in a sense, to buy this very small house and maintain it very well. It's in very, very good shape, and it's sort of the perfect house for two people in their 80's. But it's really tough for a lot of older people who don't want to leave Newton, who just--you get so committed to an area where--all of our doctors are at Newton-Wellesley Hospital. My wife worked at--was a nurse at Newton-Wellesley Hospital for 35 years, so we--the thought of moving 20 miles away or 30 miles away is not very appealing, just in terms of doctors and other things. We've been going the same drugstore for 25 years. I've been going the same auto mechanic for 30 years. You just get so used to the things that are here.

Q: Why leave after all this time?

A: The thought of changing it at my age are not very happy ones, so I don't know.

Q: Well thank you, those are wonderful insights--

A: Thank you.

Q: --and a wonderful view of so many years in Newton. Thank you so much for taking time to do this with us. We're really happy to able to include you in the Newton Talks oral history project.

END OF INTERVIEW